

BOOK REVIEW THE CLIENT-CENTERED LAW FIRM: HOW TO SUCCEED IN AN EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN WORLD

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Jack Newton, the author of the work, is the CEO and co-founder of Clio, the largest cloud-based practice management platform for attorneys and other legal practitioners, which is based in Canada. Newton is regarded as a pioneer in this area and uses his experience to resolve security, ethical and data protection issues in connection with cloud computing for the legal community and, in particular, the legal consultancy professions. He is an internationally recognized author and speaker. For those reasons alone, the work “The Client-Centered Law Firm: How to Succeed in an Experience-Driven World”, which appeared in January 2020, deserves particular attention.

Newton is not the only person to address the subject of how legal firms can cast off their old apparel and adapt to a modern world characterized by speed, technology and digitization. Over the last three years, in particular, the pressure to change as a result of legal tech and digitization in general has become an ever expanding topic and has been tackled by several authors. In addition to Newton, for example, Michele DeStefano in her work “Legal Upheaval”¹, published in 2018, and Michele DeStefano and Guenther Dobrauz-Saldapenna in their collection of essays “New Suits: Appetite for Disruption in the Legal World” (2019) have focused on this topic and on the impact of legal tech and digitization.² The latter work also identifies issues of gender and diversity as drivers of innovation.

Newton gives a very practical insight into the modern legal practice and a guide with ideas on how to create a “client-centered” practice. The book runs to 267 pages and is divided into three parts, which can be summarized by the questions: “What is a ‘client-centered’ legal practice?”, “Why is it important to be ‘client-centered’?” and “How does a ‘client-centered’ legal practice function?”.

In the first part, Newton explains why the legal market has changed and why it makes sense to pursue a client-centered approach in an experience-oriented world. In the process, comparisons are made between legal practices and legal practitioners and other customer-focused companies, such as Starbucks, Uber and AirBnB. In this way, Newton shows that, although there are different expectations of legal practices than of the companies mentioned, legal practitioners and, in particular, attorneys find themselves at a watershed where they have to concentrate not only on professionalism and legal competence in the narrower sense, but also on changing consumer and client requirements. He mentions the change in client attitude, the different approach of potential clients when looking for an attorney and the – at least subliminal – expectations with regard to the consultancy service, which must be fast, personal and, above all, practical. However, client-centered does not mean client-first. Newton uses the latter term to refer to a solution presented on a silver platter, when the client has only ordered a milkshake to go. He talks of overkill of legal information in this connection, which clients struggle to process and

¹ See also the review of DeStefano by Schneider: *Legal Upheaval: A Guide to Creativity, Collaboration and Innovation in Law*, CEJ, 4, 2, p. 79 ff. (2018).

² See also the review of DeStefano & Dobrauz-Saldapenna by Leeb: *New Suits: Appetite for Disruption in the Legal World*, in this issue.

which cannot be applied to their businesses. Client-centered solutions are tailor-made legal solutions, in the implementation of which the client is supported, but which are just as legally robust as other detailed expert reports. The author stresses here how a client-centered legal practice can develop an entirely new dynamism and power, allowing it to begin the process of growing and flourishing again. Newton also says that the experience of the client plays a very important part in this context and that the latter is not just paying for the end product and the legal advice, but also for the experience with the attorney or legal practitioner.

The second part explains what it means to run a client-centered legal practice. Newton identifies five core values (Develop Deep Client Empathy, Practice Attentiveness, Generate Ease with Communication, Demand Effortless Experiences and Create Clients for Life) and a client-centered mentality, all of which are constructive here. This is not only explained theoretically, but also developed according to a plan that illustrates the various stages that the client goes through, from the contact search through to the solution to the problem and payment of the bill. Development of a deep empathy is of crucial importance for a client-centered firm in this context.

In the final part, Newton provides the reader with a tool kit for implementing a sustainable change to a client-centered legal practice. He explains how processes and tools can be used effectively and how the team can be encouraged to adopt a client-centered mentality. He also gives tips on how to measure success and handle feedback from clients. This final step puts the wheels of success in motion and is the driver for internal efficiency and growth of the client base, making those wheels turn ever faster.

The book gives a very good and detailed overview of what client-centered means and how it can be implemented. In doing so, it consistently and very clearly highlights the two complementary perspectives on one problem of the client and the service provider. As every firm has a slightly different set of priorities and focuses on different points, strategic factors are placed in the foreground, rather than concrete ways of addressing clients in the form of a guide to acquisition. The author also has empathy for his own target audience: attorneys are always under personal pressure and are expected to make the impossible possible. This pressure is too much for most people and is a source of stress and burn-out. Although the book cannot neutralize that pressure, it takes the reader on a very enjoyable journey in showing how to deal with and possibly reduce it.

It does not matter what professional role the reader plays (from secretary to partner, from a big law firm to a specialist boutique practice) or how long they have been working there. What is important is a willingness to embrace change and to take this step oneself. That is one of the most important pieces of advice that the book has given me personally. I have identified points which we have already dealt with intuitively in a “client-centered” and thus correct way, as Newton sees it, and at the same time I can see other ways of optimizing this approach. Newton’s work provides motivation to move in that direction. His explanations are authentic and colorful, and they inspire self-analysis and reconsideration. You simply have to be prepared to think a little outside of the box in which you are put even as a student.

In conclusion, this book is definitely worth reading for anyone who is involved with the future of legal tech and client-centered legal practices and is looking for inspiration and ideas. It does not matter what part they play – or would like to play – in the overall scheme of things, the key is a willingness to change in some way.